

# Post-publication blues: how getting published can be the beginning and not the end of your publication woes



*To many authors, the point of publication can feel like the culmination of a process; the moment one's troubles are over. But for many others, it can mark the start of a new set of wholly unanticipated problems. Elizabeth Gadd discusses some of the challenges she has faced after having her own papers published; from a lack of certainty about rights retained, through unwelcome surprises emerging after the copy editing process, to the interminable wait for a paper to be recognised by important abstract and indexing databases.*

I've been publishing on and off for years as a practitioner researcher, but I've not been the corresponding author for a while. Recently, however, I've been the lead author on three papers. Unfortunately, the experience has not been a particularly positive one. Now, we all know that there are a lot of things wrong with the scholarly communication process. We hear [horror stories about peer review](#) and the [length of time it takes](#); we hear of situations where the [author has paid an APC, but the paper has not been made available on open access](#); and we hear of cases where peer reviewers have [clearly prevented the publication of a paper in order to ensure that their own work in a similar area is published first](#). However, usually, once that paper is in print (or online) it is assumed that an author's troubles are over. This has not been my experience. In fact, I would say that getting published was the easy bit, relative to some of the challenges I've faced since. What can possibly go wrong post-publication? Let me tell you.

## 1. Your copyright agreement means different things to you and your publisher

Much of my research has been in the area of copyright and scholarly communication so I usually base my choice of journal quite heavily on its copyright policy – call it an occupational hazard. In one particular case my co-author and I chose the *Journal of Librarianship & Information Science* (JOLIS), a SAGE journal, well-read by library practitioners and academics alike, well-cited, and RoMEO Green; i.e. it allows authors to self-archive both pre-print and post-print. Not only is it RoMEO Green, but it had an alluring line in its open access policy, which stated that authors “may do whatever [they] wish” with what they call Version 1 of the paper (what you and I might call the pre-print). This was enough for me. The paper was accepted quite quickly, with very minimal corrections, and was mounted online as part of SAGE's “OnlineFirst” offer within a couple of weeks. So far, so good.

The paper quickly attracted quite a bit of attention, including from open access commentator, Richard Poynder, who requested permission to use a couple of charts from the paper on his blog. Flattered, and having permission to do whatever I wished with my preprint, including those charts, I quickly agreed. However, concerned about a note on the OnlineFirst version which stated that reprints and permissions should go through RightsLink, Poynder also contacted them for permission to reuse those charts. He was given a price of \$2,500. (The APC would only have cost £1600 – or £400 under Loughborough University's NESLi deal – thus making the paper available for the whole world to reuse in perpetuity.) As you can imagine, a long and convoluted exchange ensued, much of which was written up in an [extended essay by Poynder](#). The upshot was that SAGE granted him a one-off permission to use the charts for no charge – something I still believe I had permission to do in the first place. Interestingly, when I recently revisited SAGE's [open access policy](#), I noticed they'd changed its wording. It now reads: “You may share the version of the Contribution you submitted to the journal (version 1) anywhere at any time”. It looks like I was not the only one to get my fingers burned by this incident.



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## 2. The version of record is not the version of record

One thing that surprised me having not been the corresponding author for a while, was how sophisticated publishers had become regarding the copy editing stage of the publication process. You are now returned a marked-up version of your paper with every uncrossed t and undotted i clearly indicated for your consideration. If a change is made or a query raised it will be highlighted and it is the author's job to go through them one by one, approving or rejecting the change, or answering the query. Thus it was with my paper. And despite being sick to death of it by this stage, you are clearly warned that this is your LAST CHANCE to check the paper, and once approved, the point of no return has passed. So I duly read through the paper, responding to all highlighted comments, and, with trembling hand, hit submit.

Imagine my horror, then, when I came to read the typeset version a few months later only to discover, not one, but three publisher-introduced typographical errors. These were changes that had not been highlighted in the marked-up version and, frankly, made the paper look pretty slapdash. Now, you may protest that in my reading of the copy-edited version I should have spotted these, and perhaps you're right. My argument would be that I didn't expect the publisher to make changes to my manuscript without highlighting them as they had all the other queries. But now the damage is done. (And one of the errors is the misspelling of the word "commercial" in a chart label. It's now "cummercial" – go figure.) So I find myself in a situation where the "Version of Record" is not the version of record; where the publisher PDF contains more errors than my author accepted manuscript. Which would you promote?

## 3. You're published but not published

Don't get me wrong, I know all about publication delays. But the ones we hear about are usually *pre*-publication. They involve endless delays to peer review, author revisions, re-reviews, and further revisions. Eventually you get accepted, and then there are further delays before it appears online. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about a new form of delay: the one that occurs between the "online first" version appearing and the allocation of a formal volume and issue number by the journal. Ah, what does it matter? you may ask. The paper is all typeset and available online, surely your work here is done? Well, I thought so too until about a year after my paper was published online I noticed it still wasn't appearing on Scopus. I made enquiries, and discovered that it had not yet been allocated to an issue, and until it had volume, issue and page numbers, it would not be indexed on Scopus. Further digging revealed that the scheduled formal publication date for my 2016 paper, was March 2019 – three years hence. They had not told me this when they accepted my paper.

There are two reasons why this matters. The first is related to discovery. Scopus is still the largest (subscription) bibliographic database in the world. Many literature searches begin and end with it. If your paper is not indexed, it is less likely to be found. Of course, we know that Google Scholar and ResearchGate are the principle starting points for many literature reviews, so I don't want to overstate this, but it is an issue. The second reason is more critical, and relates to citations. It stands to reason that until a paper appears in Scopus, the database will not start counting the citations to that paper. Now, Scopus citation data feeds two university league tables, the REF (well, in 2014 anyway), and also (through its sister database, SciVal) individual universities' citation performance assessments. Luckily, as an administrator, I am not eligible to be returned to the REF. However, if I were to be returned, and if Scopus citation data was supplied to my panel, the lack of citations would not reflect well on me – especially if the paper had been around for a couple of years. Similarly, I am not in the market for an academic post, but if I were, who knows how many people might be using SciVal to identify suitable candidates for well-paid, interesting posts who are discounting me due to the absence of one of my better papers.

Of course, a related issue here is that the journal itself will be negatively affected by its own tardiness. Without wishing to blow my own trumpet, the paper in question has attracted six citations in its first year (not bad for information science) and, at the time of writing, has the highest Altmetric Attention Score of any paper within the journal ever. It is likely therefore to have a positive impact on the journal's SNIP and SJR values (both calculated using the Scopus database). Unfortunately, the journal won't be benefitting from these citations for another three years. Where is the logic, I ask?

## Summary

I can't lie, as someone who does publication policy for a living, these sorts of first-hand experiences provide useful anecdotes to throw into conversation with cynical colleagues who doubt my credentials. They also serve to deepen my empathy for the poor academics whose publication activities I seek to guide and support. But that's where the upside ends. I know we don't need any more evidence to show that scholarly communication is broken, but I offer up my experiences all the same. And I encourage all those involved in the fixing to think beyond the pre-publication stuff to include all the post-publication challenges too.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the author

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